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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

# SOFT SKILLS IN TECH COMM

SOFT SKILLS FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS | THE UNDERRATED TRAIT OF RELIABILITY

USING EMPATHY TO REFRAME CONFLICT AND OVERCOME OBSTACLES TO COLLABORATION

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# A Note from the Editor

Our July / August 2023 issue focuses on Soft Skills in Technical Communication with important lessons learned and practical takeaways that apply to a wide range of industries, projects, and teams. Specific topics covered in this issue include using empathy in conflict resolution, recognition and intention in virtual teams, using negotiation and diplomacy skills, and demonstrating reliability in the workplace. Our other columns and features this month include topics on career advancement, writing product features and benefits, and all about STC's Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBOK) project. Whether you're looking to hone your soft skills, learn how to put your best foot forward on a new team, or take on the responsibility of managing others, this issue should provide you with some best practices to help out.

At this year's Summit, I had the opportunity to co-present with my counterpart, Dr. Miriam Williams, editor of our flagship journal *Technical Communication* at a session entitled "Meet the Editors." Our session provided an overview of both *Intercom* and *Technical Communication* along with a detailed look at our production process, schedule, and a sneak peak at upcoming issue topics. You can find details about upcoming *Intercom* featured topics at https://www.stc.org/intercom/editorial-calendar/ to learn more about the scope of forthcoming issues.

If you're interested in writing for *Intercom*, as always, we would love to hear from you. Recently, we've updated our Author Guidelines page on the STC website, so whether you're writing an article, column, or feature, be sure to check them out at https://www.stc.org/intercom/author-guidelines/ for information on preparing your manuscript. In the guidelines, you'll find details on everything you need to know, including writing abstracts, formatting, using graphics, citation styles, writing short biographies, permissions, and our contact information. Following these guidelines closely, including *The Chicago Manual of Style*, will ensure your submission is ready for editorial review by our staff. When you're ready to submit your manuscript, simply email it to us at intercom-editor@stc.org along with any questions about the submission process or guidelines. ■

**Dr. Craig Baehr**
Intercom Executive Editor
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# Soft Skills for Technical Communicators

By Michael Harvey | Fellow

**Soft skills function as an enabling technology helping you drive change and show your technical skills more capably.**

Content and project management, technical proficiency, and programming are useful skills to acquire to be a productive technical communicator. However, to flourish in the role, you should also cultivate soft skills. Soft skills are behaviors that help you interact harmoniously with others. Well-developed soft skills enable you to exercise hard-earned technical skills more effectively in the workplace.

Recruiters highly value soft skills. According to LinkedIn's 2019 Global Talent Trends report, 92 percent of talent acquisition professionals believe that soft skills are equally or more important than hard skills. Eighty-nine percent said that when a new hire did not work out, it was because they lacked soft skills.

Another reason to develop soft skills is job security. Reports abound claiming that AI could replace proofreaders, bookkeepers, soldiers, and even doctors. But it is unlikely that AI is going to figure out how to use soft skills anytime soon. Even the most sophisticated chatbot cannot take a joke.

These four soft skills are critical for technical communicators:

- Listening
- Negotiating
- Persuading
- Presenting.

The foundation of these skills rests on something inherent in our profession—communication. These skills overlap with one another. All involve listening. Successful negotiating requires listening and persuading. Effective presenters are persuading their audience to listen and think about their content.

Pre-pandemic, you may have ordinarily practiced soft skills face-to-face. Now, with a reduction of in-person communication, you need a different mindset to use them. But first, you need to understand them.

## Listening

Common sense suggests that because we have two ears and one mouth, we should listen at least twice as much as we speak. Listening is important because it helps you avoid misunderstandings and confusion. It helps to build trust and rapport. As a result of that trust, the application of listening skills amplifies the power of what you say.

Developing listening skills requires practice of the following behaviors:

| Behavior | Execution |
|---|---|
| Give undivided attention | • Focus completely on who you are speaking with.<br>• Avoid distractions or interruptions. |
| Provide feedback | • Give feedback that is specific and to the point.<br>• Avoid language that is judgmental or accusatory.<br>• Check for understanding and provide an opportunity to respond and ask questions. |
| Confirm information | • Do not assume that you completely understand what the other person says. Ask for clarification whenever you are not sure. |
| Use body language to express understanding | • To show that you are listening and engaged, use the following body language:<br>◦ Maintain eye contact.<br>◦ Nod your head occasionally.<br>◦ Use facial expressions. |
| Use active listening | • Ask clarifying questions.<br>• Paraphrase what the other person says to demonstrate that you understand their perspective.<br>• Think more about what you are hearing than what you are going to say next. |

## Negotiating

Negotiating guides people to a mutually acceptable solution to a problem. It is important because a workplace with fewer conflicts is understandably more productive. To negotiate effectively, practice the following behaviors:

| Behavior | Execution |
|---|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Be clear about what you want | *Crucial Conversations* by Joseph Grenny and colleagues emphasizes starting with the heart whenever you negotiate: take a breath, clear your head, and ask what you want for *yourself*, for *others*, and for the *relationship* with the person with whom you are negotiating. |
| Be clear about what you mean | Do not assume that the person with whom you are negotiating knows everything that you do. For example, recall conversations with SMEs. They have more expertise than you do, so when they explain things to you, they might inadvertently leave out key details. Turn this around: read the person with whom you are negotiating for clues about whether they understand what you are saying. Use active listening skills to arrive at mutual clarity. |
| Use emotional intelligence | • Identify and manage your emotions.<br>• Empathize with others. Put yourself in their shoes.<br>• Diffuse conflict. Stay calm when things get heated and acknowledge the validity of feelings. |
| Build on areas of agreement | Seek out areas where you agree and move forward from them. When you hit a snag, this gives you a place from which you can reset. |

According to Michael and Mini Donaldson, authors of *Negotiating for Dummies*, signs that someone is resisting what you are saying include:

- Twisting away from you
- Reducing eye contact
- Locking ankles
- Making fist-like gestures
- Fidgeting.

When you see these cues, turn up your emotional intelligence and pivot the conversation to areas of agreement.

## Persuading

In contrast to negotiating, which emphasizes a mutually satisfactory outcome, persuading focuses more on getting others to see things your way. This is important for leaders who need to inspire and motivate others. When persuading, you need to be clear, use emotional intelligence, and build on areas of agreement in the same way you do when you are negotiating. You also need to do the following:

| Behavior | Execution |
|---|---|
| Build rapport | • Connect with people, which requires being attentive to what they are saying or doing (that is, listening!).<br>• Use complementary and relaxed body language to show you are an ally and create a sense of familiarity and trust. |
| Build a logical case for your position | • Clearly communicate one or more premises. For example, all mammals have lungs.<br>• Make inferences. Dogs are mammals.<br>• Follow inferences to a conclusion. Therefore, dogs have lungs. |

In *Never Split the Difference*..., Chris Voss, a former hostage negotiator, explains that there is one phrase that indicates you are succeeding in convincing someone of your position: “That’s right.”

When someone says, "You're right," it indicates that they are just going along with you. As Voss explains, "whenever someone is bothering you, and they just won't let up ... what do you tell them to get them to shut up and go away? "You're right." But when someone says, "That's right," it shows that they have assessed what you said and pronounced it correct. After you hear, "That's right," give the other person an opportunity to elaborate their position, paraphrase what you hear them say, and then point out how what you are asking for aligns with it.

> **When persuading, you need to be clear, use emotional intelligence, and build on areas of agreement in the same way you do when you are negotiating.**

## Presenting

When presenting, you might be referring to a slide deck, giving a speech without slides, or teaching a class. Effective presenting requires you to *tailor* your presentation to the needs and knowledge of your audience. This requirement is congruent with the core skill of technical communication.

To immerse yourself in expert tailoring, check out videos on YouTube (see the Suggested Reading list) that show someone explaining a topic in five levels of increasing complexity. One video shows a computer scientist explaining machine learning to a child, a teen, a college student, a graduate student, and an expert. Another video has a neuroscientist explaining human memory to someone at those same five levels.

To deliver an effective presentation, you must prepare. You might be able to extemporize a passable presentation about something that you know, but to give one that leaves an impression and drives home your key points, regardless of what you know, you must do the following preparation:

| Behavior | Execution |
|---|---|
| Block out a complete draft | Enumerate the main points that you plan to cover. Fill in details for each point. Do not get distracted by one point at the expense of others. Produce something of substance on every point that you intend to cover. |
| Use visuals | When you are presenting with slides, use graphics more heavily than text. You do not want your audience reading your slides instead of listening to you speak. Cover what you intend to say in your slide notes. |
| Review and revise the draft | Identify points that are well covered, inadequately covered, and excessively covered. Trim, fill, and fix points accordingly. |
| Rehearse the presentation | Perform a dry run of your presentation to a group of trusted colleagues. A performance helps you identify unnecessary content, lack of clarity, and most importantly, awkward transitions. |
| Revise the presentation based on the rehearsal | This might require you to discard points or rethink the sequence of topics. Remember what Faulkner said: "Kill your darlings." |

## How to Apply Soft Skills in a Post-Pandemic Workplace

The COVID 19 pandemic upended the professional workplace. With the new normal of remote and hybrid work, the opportunity to exercise soft skills face-to-face has diminished.

Consider the pre-pandemic workplace.

We went into an office, interacted with our colleagues face-to-face, and took part in spontaneous conversations in office doorways or break rooms. We could read our colleagues' faces and body language to guide our interactions.

Contrast that to our current workplace.

When we see our colleagues, it is usually on a screen. Spontaneous conversations take place in chat windows and juggling those chats can be difficult.

Applying soft skills in a post-pandemic workplace constricts our use of body language cues during interactions. You must adjust your mindset accordingly. The lack of or reduction in human contact has lengthened the distance between point A and point B when listening, negotiating, persuading, and presenting. You must be prepared to go that extra distance.

## Listening Post-Pandemic

When you do not have a person in front of you, show that you are listening by using whatever body language cues you can subtly convey through a webcam. Pay close attention to changes in the other person's expression or signs of distraction. Keep in mind that when you look away from the webcam for a noticeable length of time, it suggests that you are distracted.

During any conversation online, look at your webcam, not your screen. This creates a sense of eye contact. However, do not stare. Think about the webcam as a tangible representation of your conversation partner and interact with it in the same way you would with someone face-to-face. Therefore, do not do on a webcam anything you would not do in a meeting room.

Online group conversations without video lack the timing of face-to-face conversations, so often folks talk over one another. Because of this, you must amplify your sensitivity to verbal cues that indicate that someone has finished a thought. This might be hard when someone barely pauses between utterances. But think of that as an active listening opportunity!

Provide feedback and confirm information as you would in person. Remember that you must heighten your sensitivity to scant visual and subtle verbal cues as you do so.

## Negotiating and Persuading Post-Pandemic

These days, most negotiating and persuading occurs through email messages. Basic strategies to improve the effectiveness of email messages are especially important when you use that medium to negotiate or persuade. For example, to alert the recipient of what you expect from them, use a keyword as the first word in the subject line of emails (for example, REQUEST, ANNOUNCEMENT, URGENT). Whatever follows the label should summarize the overall point of your message. These steps often help the other person decide whether to immediately read your message or skip over it.

In the message itself, get directly to the point—provide an executive summary in the first paragraph. Supply supporting information after that summary with more sensitivity to the flow of ideas; do not make your readers work to understand how one point follows another.

In less formal email exchanges, you can work your way to the point. "How's it going?" is an acceptable way to lead. Still, briskly arrive at the point of your message after these brief pleasantries.

When you negotiate or persuade over the phone, empathizing with others is difficult, because you cannot read a face. But you can train yourself to detect tension in someone's voice, which is usually associated with a change in rapidity of speech, pitch, volume, or all the above. Use those cues to detect conflict and diffuse it before it escalates.

When negotiating or persuading, be persistent without nagging. I keep a copy of every email I send. If I have made a request without a deadline and I do not hear anything after one week, I send a follow-up email. "Hi

Zeke, I reached out last week about…" If I made a request with a deadline and I do not hear by the deadline, the next day I send a follow up email. In that message, I start with "Thanks to everyone who responded to… I still need information about…" and then I copy and paste from the first email.

Avoid distractions when negotiating or persuading in real time. If you are in the middle of a video call, wait to answer another call or message. If you must answer another call or message, apologize to the person on the call, stop doing what you are doing, and tend to the other call as expeditiously as you can.

Suppose that you are negotiating with someone through text. When three text messages (or emails) do not move the negotiation forward, ask whether you can switch to video. Switching to video is a good strategy whenever misunderstanding seems to be growing.

Anytime you anticipate a tough negotiation with someone virtually, start the session by showing yourself through your webcam. If the other person does not show themselves, do not press the point. Right away, thank the other person for their time. Ask for permission to record the meeting for future reference. Use active listening throughout the session. When you wrap things up, summarize your understanding and agreement and again thank them for their time.

Sometimes you need to wrangle a negotiation with more than one party, often with different agendas and points of view. Consider the following email message that I sent to my extended development team.

> At the risk of sounding like a broken record, <an issue that I have raised repeatedly about a feature> is still an issue. Given that <the feature> is problematic, can we simply remove it from <the product> and the documentation until <a different approach to the functionality> is implemented?
>
> I ask only because we have removed or hidden references to <X>, <Y>, and other problematic features before. Should we give <this issue I have raised> the same treatment?
>
> All it takes is one person in the field trying to use <this feature> to pull us into an extended discussion about why it does not work, what we intend to do about it, and so on.

"At the risk of sounding like a broken record" is an example of anchoring someone's emotions, which Chris Voss covers in *Never Split the Difference*. Anchoring is admitting up front that you are mentioning a problem that you have brought up before, but then offering a specific solution. It gets the "there they go again" reaction out of the way to clear a path to consider "here's how to fix it."

In my message, I use a logical argument. My premise is that a feature is problematic. My inferences are (a) someone is going to use the feature and waste our time and (b) we have provided a solution to a similar problem before. My conclusion is to use the same remedy this time to avoid someone wasting our time. Pre-pandemic, I would have gathered the interested parties in a conference room and read the body language of participants to guide the discussion. Post-pandemic, I must use other means, which in this case was email.

## Presenting Post-Pandemic

Pre-pandemic, presenting effectively often meant keeping eye contact and using gestures to engage with the audience as you spoke. That is irrelevant in a post-pandemic world. When you give webcasts, you are performing for the camera. You cannot read the room, so you have little leeway in departing from your prepared talking points. You cannot gauge the interest of your audience to decide whether to elaborate on a point or quickly move on to the next.

Hence, you must double down on preparation. This might require giving multiple dry runs of your presentation and making substantive changes based on what you learn from the rehearsals.

Focus is especially important as you present online, because whenever you work from a screen, there are potential email or message popups. Exit your email application and put your text messenger on Do Not Disturb. Close the door. Consider the webcam as a tangible representation of your audience.

## The Primary Takeaway

Regardless of whether you exercise soft skills in person or virtually, you should think of them as an "enabling technology" for your professional skills. An enabling

technology is an invention or innovation that you can apply to drive radical change in a culture. For example, eyeglasses enabled visually impaired people to see clearly for the first time. Soft skills enable you to display your technical and writing skills more capably. They can drive radical change in your professional and personal capabilities. They can increase job satisfaction and allow your team to be more effective and efficient.

Have I persuaded you yet? Good. Spread the word because we all could benefit from a more harmonious workplace. ■

## SUGGESTED READINGS

2019 LinkedIn Global Talent Trends report https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/talent-solutions/resources/pdfs/global_talent_trends_2019_emea.pdf

Computer Scientist Explains Machine Learning in 5 Levels of Difficulty. WIRED. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5q87K1WaoFI&list=LL&index=51

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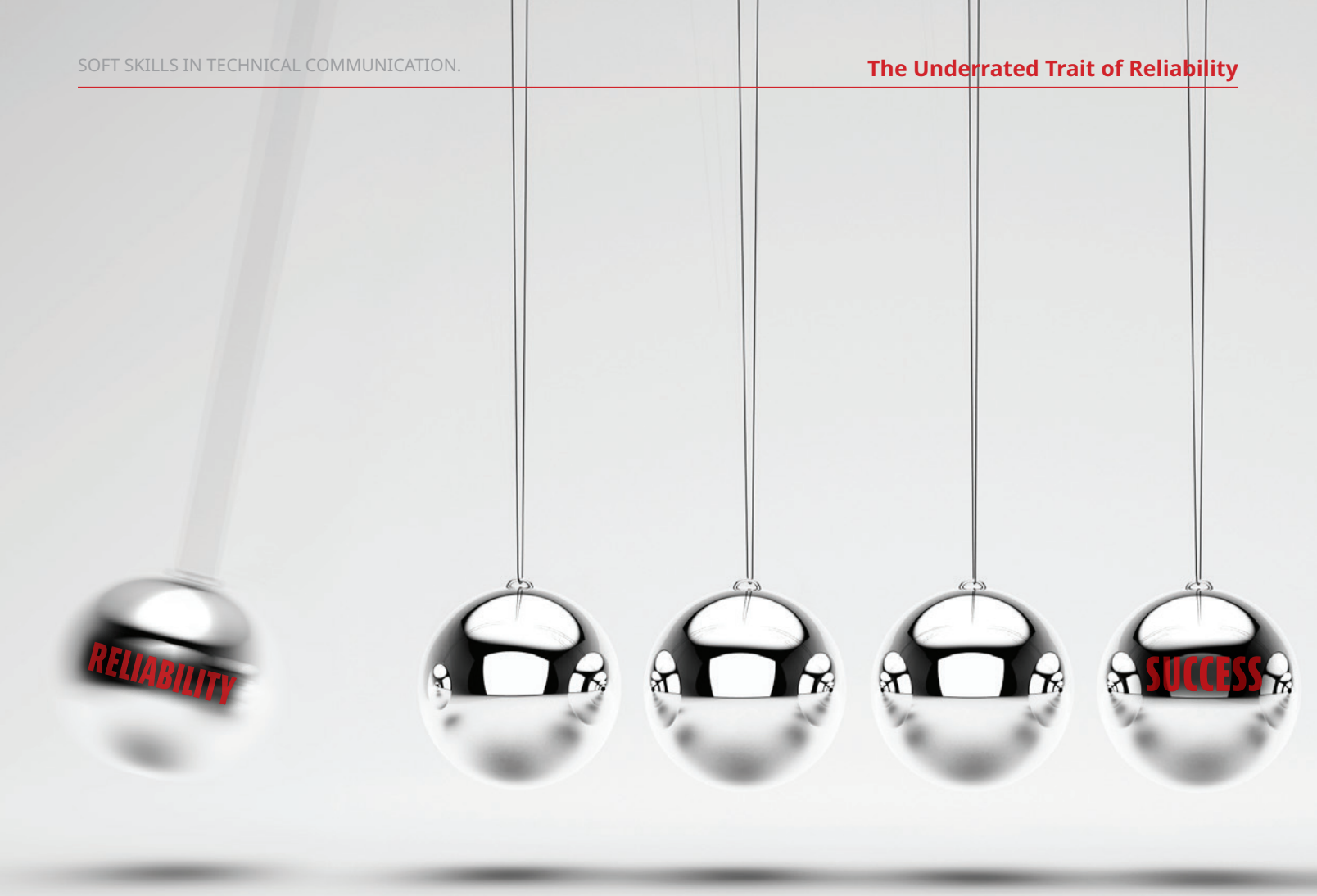


# The Underrated Trait of Reliability

By Alyssa Fox | Fellow

**Reliability fosters trust and yields results. Follow these important steps to boost your own reliability as a valued contributor.**

In a world of information bombardment, ever-decreasing attention spans, and the curse of busyness, I've noticed a trend that's becoming glaringly more prevalent—unreliability. It starts as a little thing here or there—not answering some emails, forgetting a deadline, being consistently late to events. But before you know it, even your best intentions can't hide the fact that you've lost track of your commitments.

Reliability isn't talked about much when people discuss soft skills, so you might be asking, "Is it really that big of a deal?" Well, yes, it is. Reliability is one of the vital parts of building trust. And trust is the backbone of all relationships. Though I focus on the professional aspects of unreliability here, you can apply most of these points to your personal life as well.

## What Is Reliability?

What does it mean to be reliable? Per Dictionary.com, reliable means "...that may be relied on or trusted; dependable in achievement, accuracy, honesty, etc." I especially like this definition because it includes both trust and dependability. Synonyms include trustworthy, consistent, and authentic. For me to rely on you, I need to be able to trust that you will do what you say you will, when you say you will, in a consistent manner.

Too often we talk about the hard skills one needs to perform their job well—knowledge in your domain, technology expertise, or a certain education. But soft skills affect your work as much as, if not more than, hard skills. We don't create work products in a vacuum—we must interact with our colleagues to make products, deliver services, and run businesses. Soft skills can be applied in any job, anywhere, and reliability should be at the top of that list.

Why should you care? Because the impact is greater than you think. On your colleagues, on your family, and on yourself. If you find that you struggle with keeping up with your appointments or tasks, or get constant reminders from others because you're not delivering, read on.

## How Unreliability Affects Others

When you don't deliver, it has a ripple effect on the people around you.

- **It wastes their time**. If you're repeatedly late for meetings, your colleagues spend an unknown amount of time sitting around waiting on you. They could have been doing something they chose to do, rather than having their time controlled by you. Additionally, have you ever added up the cost of all those people sitting there for 15 minutes just waiting? Those wasted dollars are not something your CFO wants to see.
- **It causes them more work**. Think back on a time you've worked with someone who is unreliable. How often do you have to follow up with them to try to get answers out of them? How often did you just step in and do something yourself rather than waiting for them to do it because you never heard back from them? Neither scenario is pleasant and adds to what is probably an already too-heavy workload, causing resentment along the way.
- **It can negatively influence others to do the same thing**. The more people see others not responding, arriving late, or not delivering when they say they will, the more likely it is they will start doing the same thing, having a snowball effect across your organization.
- **It degrades the work product and costs money**. Often, unreliability is a symptom of being overwhelmed. If that's the case, your work product will have lower quality due to your attention being dispersed among too many things. If you're constantly receiving reminders from your colleagues and trying to keep up with those, it's likely you're unable to take the time to see the bigger picture of how all the pieces of the product fit together. This focus on the overwhelm could cause some pieces to fall through the cracks. The back and forth, the slips in the product, the late delivery—it all costs your organization money.

## How Unreliability Affects You

In the short-term, being unresponsive might not affect you much, but over time it adds up and impacts your professional future.

- **It overshadows your intention**. Regardless of your plan to respond or deliver what you say you will, if you repeatedly don't, even your best intentions get lost in the muddle. People typically

give you the benefit of the doubt if you miss a deadline irregularly, but if it's a common thing, they stop listening to your declarations of what you'll do and no longer trust you.

- **It changes your reputation**. Building strong workplace relationships is essential to your success in an organization. If you are reliable, your coworkers depend on you because they know you're a consistent performer. If you're not reliable, your reputation shifts, labeling you as someone people don't necessarily want to work with. Unreliability can also paint you as disorganized and thoughtless.
- **It affects the perception of your capacity for more responsibility**. The more responsibility you can take on, the more valuable you are to your employer. If you show yourself to be consistent in your responsiveness and delivery, it's likely you'll be given more interesting and more visible projects, as well as have the opportunity to lead or manage others. If you can't reliably deliver at your current level of responsibility, you're certainly not going to get more.

## Demonstrating Reliability

While reliability is in and of itself a skill, there are several other traits and skills that tie into it and help you demonstrate you can be trusted.

- High work quality. While one can certainly be relied upon to deliver shoddy work, people typically associate reliability with consistency around high-quality work.
- Time management. Being on time with your deadlines and deliverables requires a solid understanding of the tasks on your plate and the ability to allocate hours to those tasks in a way that makes the best use of your time.
- Responsiveness. Communicating where you are on a task early and often keeps others in the loop on requests that they've made of you or joint projects.
- Planning skills. Being reliable requires realistic estimates for a project and contingency plans. If you approach a situation haphazardly, it will be more difficult to put things in perspective and prioritize accordingly.

Possessing and demonstrating reliability is increasingly essential in a new work world shaped by the pandemic and economic shifts. CareerAddict highlights that businesses are depending more on remote workforces and asking employees to do more and more. Therefore, your reliability can garner you such benefits as promotions, more pay, and more opportunities.

## Tips for Being More Reliable

If you recognize that perhaps you're not as reliable as you'd like to be, don't despair. You can take some easy steps to improve your dependability.

### Don't Overcommit

We are all bombarded with requests from others: to volunteer, for our money, for our thoughts or time. Practice pausing before you say yes to any of these requests, and ask yourself:

- What is the time commitment required? Is it a one-time thing? Recurring? Ongoing and for how long?
- Am I qualified to carry out this request, or is there someone else who's more appropriate?
- Is this an area of interest for me?
- Does this help me achieve my personal or professional goals?

### Prepare—Thoroughly and Specifically

Know what you need to accomplish each task, then make a plan for accomplishing the task, working backward from your deadline. When planning, make sure you set **specific** steps in your plan, rather than generalizations that are hard to measure. For example, if you are writing a white paper, rather than announcing that your intention is to "write a white paper by December 20," make a plan that includes steps and dates for gathering information from subject matter experts, writing the first draft, getting the draft reviewed, and so on through the completion of the paper.

Check your calendar at the end of each workday so you know what's coming the next day. Read the materials ahead of the meeting. Leave buffer time between meetings to walk to the next conference room. It really is the little things that help here.

### Find a Way to Organize Yourself

Write things down. Let me say that again. **Write. Things. Down**. We all think we can remember things, but there's so much going on nowadays that we just can't. So why exert the mental energy on these things when we have a simple solution—calendars, notebooks, and spreadsheets?

A calendar can be your best friend in managing your various commitments, responsibilities, and down time. If you don't schedule things on your calendar, especially in the personal arena, they will fall off your radar. Everyday life sneaks up on you sometimes, and if you don't have the visual reminder of your various commitments, weeks will go by and you'll realize you've done all the things you had to do, but none of the things you wanted to do.

I prefer to keep all of my personal, professional, and volunteer events on a single calendar so I don't double-book myself without realizing it (it's happened). Even if you maintain separate calendars for each of these areas, find a way to view all of the calendars at once so you can see everything you have scheduled for a particular day. You can also color-code your calendar if that helps you organize yourself.

Use spreadsheets and notebooks to organize your work. Look into apps and tools that make you more organized and productive. The better handle you have on your responsibilities, the more likely it is you'll be able to respond quickly and deliver on time because the information you need is at your fingertips. Check out nTask's list of the 65 best organizational tools for work, and ideas from Inc. for your personal life.

## Communicate More

Often, people fall into the trap of not responding to others because they don't have the answer yet. I suggest that if it's been a couple of days, let the requester know you're still working on it and will get back to them shortly. Though you might not be able to help them just yet, this proactive communication lets them know you haven't forgotten them and saves them the trouble of having to follow up.

If you know you can't deliver something by the time you said you would, let people know early so they can

adjust their plans accordingly. Be proactive and think about what helps move the work forward, rather than doing nothing and keeping projects stagnant. Additionally, be honest about mistakes along the way. Being upfront about a misstep and addressing the problem quickly indicates that you're open through the whole process and that your focus is on the end goal. Communicate. All the time. We must let people know what we're doing, why we're doing it, or what we might need to do instead.

## Conclusion

Reliability is essential to having a good reputation, to building relationships that are long-lasting, and to garnering more trust in your organization. The first time you drop the ball, you might get a second chance. Maybe even the next time. But beyond that? Your reputation is tarnished. Dale Carnegie wrote in *How to Win Friends and Influence People* that you need to be genuinely interested in other people to accomplish the titular goal. And what better way to show your interest than to demonstrate that people can rely on you to be responsive and deliver consistently. Be their go-to person. Build the trust. And enjoy the stronger relationships and winning results that reliability yields. ■

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# Using Empathy to Reframe Conflict and Overcome Obstacles to Collaboration

By Gini Martinez

**Practicing empathy can reframe your viewpoint and lead to better team outcomes.**

Have you ever felt anxious being part of a team that never sends out an agenda prior to a meeting? Have you ever found it difficult to contribute your ideas to a project because of a colleague who dominates every single conversation? As a technical communicator, you likely find yourself working in collaboration with others involved in content or product development. The process of coming together to achieve a common goal or objective can be a fulfilling aspect of your work, but it's not without its challenges. Whether you're part of a formal team or an ad hoc version, it's sure to be composed of varying personalities and approaches to achieving a project's goals. The upside to being surrounded by diverse individuals is that they bring an array of ideas, which can be a boon to strategizing and problem solving. The downside is butting against opposing styles of communication and team engagement, which can create conflict and become a roadblock to achieving team goals. How you navigate these conflicts impacts your success as a team as well as your mental health. One important interpersonal skill that can help you manage both is empathy.

## When Individual Differences Become Barriers to Collaboration

Successful collaboration involves sharing ideas, information, and resources while working in a coordinated and mutually supportive way towards a shared objective. Collaborating cross-functionally with experts in varied domains can boost creativity and innovation, and improve decision making. It can also help to build stronger relationships between individuals and groups, and promote a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for project outcomes. But what happens when the best minds for a project have conflicting approaches to work?

Have you ever struggled to complete your project tasks because they depend on a research report a teammate has been procrastinating? If you are organized and always on top of your work, this situation can elicit frustration. Have you ever experienced a colleague who obsessed over every little detail of an upcoming informal meeting? If you tend to strive for good enough instead of perfection, you might find that exhausting. You might have a hard time relating to these teammates and find their contrasting behaviors aggravating. It can help to realize they are really just different expressions of the same personality trait characterized as conscientiousness.

**Successful collaboration involves sharing ideas, information, and resources while working in a coordinated and mutually supportive way towards a shared objective.**

## Personality Influences Work Behaviors

Personality is defined as "a bias towards particular traits (characteristics) that in turn affect behavior" (Oseland 2012, 2). Because our personality, among other things, influences our behavior, individual differences in the workplace can often be attributed to these traits. Extensive research conducted on personality over the past several decades has deepened psychologists' understanding of how they can impact teams. Becoming familiar with the different personality characteristics and how you might see them play out within your collaborative environment is the first step to becoming better at interacting with them.

The Big Five Personality traits is a five-factor model of characteristics that includes (Goldberg 1992):

- Openness
- Conscientiousness
- Extraversion
- Agreeableness
- Emotional Stability.

The five factors are typically assessed in the following ways[3,] (Cannon-Bowers and Bowers 2011; Sackett and Walmsley 2014):

- Openness—*the degree to which a person is curious, broad-minded, open to new ideas and new experiences.*
- Conscientiousness—*the extent to which a person exhibits impulse control, organization, procrastination, perseverance.*
- Extraversion—*the extent to which a person is sociable, warm, energized by social situations, sensation-seeking, assertive, talkative.*
- Agreeableness—*the extent to which a person is respectful, trustworthy, empathetic, generous with resources, cooperative, flexible, tolerant.*
- Emotional Stability—*the extent to which a person responds to stressors with negative emotions, how much they tend toward anxiety, and their tolerance for adverse stimuli.*

Each trait exists on a continuum, so a person can be high, low, or somewhere in the middle and express these traits accordingly. For example, someone scoring higher in emotional stability might exhibit self-confidence under stress, while someone scoring lower might respond to stress by ruminating or worrying. Most people tend to fall somewhere around the middle of the scale for each trait. Research has found personality traits to be stable over short periods of time[5], but a person's score can change throughout the course of their life due to normal development. It's important to note that these traits in their extremes are not evaluated as being good or bad. There are potential positives and negatives to scoring higher or lower on any of them.

The Big Five personality test is sometimes confused with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) or Enneagram of Personality typing tools, so you may be wondering what's the difference between the three assessments. Unlike MBTI and Enneagram, the Big Five was developed by researchers, is data-driven, and assess traits on a continuum instead of sorting people into distinct personality boxes. The most important difference, however, is that the Big Five allows for people's traits to change over their lifespan, which is important if you score lower on openness and need to learn new interpersonal skills, like empathy (Soto and Jackson 2013).

It's helpful to recognize extreme expressions of the Big Five within the context of the workplace, so I've included examples of each trait below.

### Openness

High—Moves the weekly meeting from a conference room to a local cafe
Low—Rejects all ideas that don't align with their perspective

### Conscientiousness

High—Sticks to the plan no matter what the cost
Low—Keeps their options open until the very last second

### Extraversion

High—Proposes all team events be in person
Low—Can't bring themselves to submit their work for an industry award

### Agreeableness

High—Leaves their Calendly wide open to accommodate everyone else's schedule
Low—Never answers emails outside 9:00–5:00

### Emotional Stability

High—Reframes project setbacks
Low—Catastrophizes when the project veers slightly off course

Understanding that behavioral differences are likely rooted in longstanding traits such as personality can help you to appreciate others' differing needs so *you* can engage in more constructive behaviors. This is where empathy comes in.

## Using Empathy to Reframe Your View

Empathy is considered by psychologists to be composed of two dimensions: cognitive (thoughts) and affective (feelings) (Healey and Grossman 2018). Empathy is often described as being able to take the perspective of another person or to imagine yourself in their shoes. It involves asking yourself what might the other person be thinking or feeling. Perspective taking provides a non-judgemental lens through which you can view others' behavior. It facilitates positive social behaviors, like

resource and idea sharing or coordinating efforts toward a common goal, all of which are part of successful collaboration. When we understand where a team member is coming from, or understand *why* their style of engagement is in direct conflict with ours, it helps to dampen our emotional reaction so we can respond productively instead. Practicing empathy makes you a better teammate, and while relationships involve multiple people, sometimes it only takes one person to shift the dynamic of a collaborative experience.

> **Empathy is often described as being able to take the perspective of another person or to imagine yourself in their shoes.**

## What Practicing Empathy Can Look Like

Maybe you score higher in extraversion and you're frustrated because it feels like you're the only person doing all the problem solving during meetings. What if it just so happens the rest of the team scores lower in extraversion? If you tend to jump right in and offer up thoughts or suggestions, try taking the perspective of a person who is less comfortable asserting their ideas that way in a group setting. Next time you feel the need to contribute, wait thirty seconds to see if someone else speaks up first. Practicing empathy in this circumstance can help you change your behavior to better serve the group and project outcomes.

It could be you score lower in conscientiousness and tend to procrastinate as part of your creative process (yes, that's a thing) and you're annoyed by your colleague who keeps badgering you to complete your task early (Shin and Grant 2016). What if it's just that your colleague scores higher in conscientiousness? Try taking the perspective of someone who is constantly striving to achieve. While it may feel like they're judging you for not completing work within their preferred time frame, they're likely more stressed by the exceedingly high goals they set for themselves and their response to that stress is being expressed in your direction. Practicing empathy in this circumstance can help you reframe the situation and maintain your sanity.

## Putting Empathy into Action for Better Team Outcomes

Keep in mind that while personality traits tend to be stable over short periods of time, people can learn how to adapt their behavior in certain situations, such as collaborating at work. Learning to connect workplace behaviors with personality traits and becoming aware of your own tendencies, empowers you to modify your approach as necessary. In this way, learning how to handle conflicting workplace behaviors can not only make for a smoother experience and facilitate project outcomes, but it also will make you a more desirable teammate.

If you're aware of your own personality traits and recognize what you need to collaborate effectively, you can articulate those needs to your team. By letting them know that you prefer an agenda prior to meetings to organize your thoughts, you'll be valued as a good communicator. If you recognize conflicting approaches as individual differences (instead of personal attacks against you or the group), and express an openness to finding mutually beneficial solutions, you'll be valued as someone who can work through challenges and obstacles and is open to new ideas. Most importantly, seeing teammates through the nonjudgmental lens of empathy helps forge mutual trust and respect, which are fundamental to any collaboration.

But how can you know how your colleagues are biased toward the Big Five personality traits? Google "Big Five" and you'll find a plethora of free online assessments. Taking the test and sharing your results can be a fun team icebreaker. But really, practicing empathy doesn't require knowing how all your colleagues score on a personality assessment. If you find yourself locking horns with a teammate, it doesn't *really* matter if you're certain it's because you both lie on the opposite ends of openness. You can still try to see the situation from their perspective.

Empathy is not a cure-all for dysfunctional teams. Sometimes you will find yourself working with openly hostile individuals who challenge every new idea or being led by someone who is unsure of themselves and allows more assertive team members to steamroll right over them. You may have to consult a third party to find a mutually beneficial resolution or simply fortify your personal boundaries. Practice empathy when you can and give yourself some grace when you just aren't up to it. At the very least, you'll learn not to take it personally when others behave differently from you. ■

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# Negotiation, Building a Business Case, and Improv Comedy: Your Soft Skills Golden Triangle

By Jack Molisani | Fellow

**Learn to pitch your business case, get the resources you need, and negotiate your way to success.**

Before writing something for the soft skills issue, I posted the following question on content-related groups on Facebook and LinkedIn: What soft skills do content professionals need to be successful? I received a wide range of answers, so I searched commonalities in the responses and grouped similar answers together. For example, I grouped the following answers under the heading Workplace Negotiation Skills:

- Negotiation
- Diplomacy
- Conflict Resolution
- Finding Common Ground
- Managing Project Scope.

Granted, each of the above is a skill unto itself. But in an effort to find some trends in the data, I did my best to look for the commonalities in the survey answers. There were almost 100 different answers (even with grouping) and here are the top ten (see also Figure 1: Soft Skills for Success).

- Workplace Negotiation Skills
- Listening Skills
- Empathy
- Leadership
- Vision
- Curiosity
- Flexibility
- Patience
- Self-awareness
- Relationship to Management.

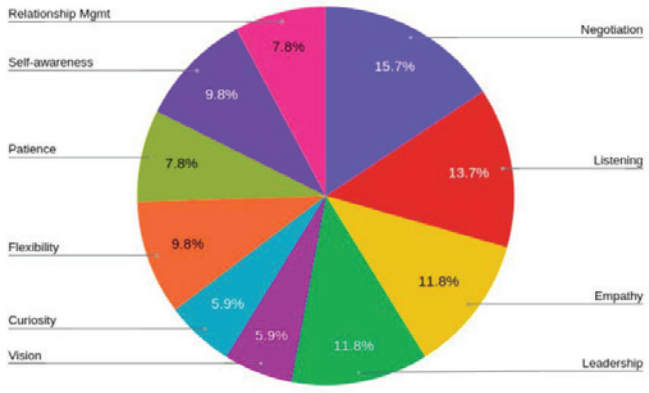


*Figure 1: Soft Skills for Success*

While I could easily write an article about each, I think many of the above can be addressed under the headings Workplace Negotiation, Building a Business Case, and Improvisational Comedy (yes, improv comedy!).

## Negotiation and Diplomacy Skills

When interviewing for jobs or contracts, I always ask the person I'm meeting to tell me a bit about what they are looking for, as I have learned over the years that the requirements in the job posting often bear little resemblance to the actual job requirements.

Most interviewers answer with something domain- or tool-related. One person, however, replied "Diplomacy skills." It took all my willpower not to cock my head like the cartoon dog Scooby Doo and say "*urrrrr???*" Instead I calmly nodded and said, "Tell me more."

Apparently, the subject matter experts in this company were all brilliant scientists, each of who felt he/she was always right. So they needed a technical writer who not only could manage strong personalities, they needed someone who can manage conflicting edits from strong-willed SMEs. Enter workplace negotiation skills.

### What Is Negotating?

For many people, the term negotiating brings to mind unpleasant haggling with a used car salesperson. But negotiating isn't something you do just when buying a large-ticket item. Deciding what features will be documented given the time available, getting your kids to clean their rooms before playing video games, even deciding what movie to watch on date night all involve negotiating in one form or another. Some common definitions of negotiating include:

- To attempt to come to an agreement on something through discussion and compromise (Dictionary.com)
- The process of achieving agreement through discussion (Wiktionary.com)
- Conferring, discussing, or bargaining to reach agreement (Webster's Dictionary).

Note that all three definitions include the word agreement.

Next, let's look at the derivation: Latin *negotiatus*, past participle of *negotiari* to "carry on business, do business." So negotiation is just part and parcel of doing business! Interesting, huh?

For what would you (a staff or contract content professional) be negotiating?

- Your Compensation
- Project Scope
- Project Deadlines
- Resources
- Headcount
- Comp time
- Training
- Authoring Tools, etc.

What do you regularly give up in order to get what you want in the workplace? Most often it is your free time (deadlines!), money, or job security (if there is such a thing anymore). So you could also say that negotiation is the art of giving up as little of what you have in order to get what you want.

In order to justify what you are asking for, it help to build a business case.

## Building a Business Case

A business case is a document that explains *why* your organization should give you what you're asking for (usually money), usually in terms of ROI. The amount of money that is anticipated to be saved or generated as the direct result of expenditure is known as return on investment (ROI). ROI is normally measured in time and money: how long it will take to recoup the money spent, and how much money will be generated or saved.

For example, energy-efficient LED light bulbs might cost $7 dollars each, but if they use $1.00 less energy a month than traditional incandescent light bulbs, they pay for themselves in seven months. Another example: A client of mine translates their documentation into 26 languages. When their documentation was authored in MS Word, they needed to send the whole document to the translators to update (which can be time consuming and expensive). However, when they started authoring in a component content management system, only the individual topics that have changed need to be translated. My client reported that they recouped the entire cost of purchasing a content management system (through reduced translation costs) in just one product release!

When you build your business case, state:

- The problem
- One or more solutions
- How much it will cost to implement the solution(s)
- How much it will cost the organization if you do nothing
- The ROI that could be realized if a solution is implemented.

State how the situation is a problem for the organization (not just for you), and state the problem in terms of dollars and cents. For example, say you are building a business case to migrate legacy content from MS Word into a content management system. The problem is not "We need a content management system," the problem is "We are spending more than we need to on translation costs." Even better if you can use hard numbers: "We are wasting $50,000 a release on translation costs by not having a content management system."

Here is an example that illustrates why one should include "the cost of doing nothing" in a business case. The United States Postal Service contracted a major US airline to carry airmail. At the time, the postal service had started adding bar codes to the bottom of all letters to better automate the tracking, routing, and delivering of mail. The postal service thought that using these bar codes was so important that if the airline wasn't able to scan each piece of mail by the roll-out date, the airline still had to carry the mail—they just wouldn't be paid for it.

The airline in question spent millions buying equipment to scan mail, but they didn't have any policies and procedures in place on where to put the mail in their hub cites when it wasn't on a plane. So the airline came to us (a staffing agency) and asked us to find two tech writers in each of their hub cites to document where and how to route the mail for that particular airport. We promptly found the perfect team of writers to do that—until the airline project

manager called me to say he couldn't get the purchase order approved.

"So what are you going to do?" "We're going to cobble together a team from various internal resources."

I suspected that using non-technical writers to create detailed policies and procedures was doomed to fail, so I waited two months and then called the project manager. I asked how the project went, and he replied, "It failed miserably. In fact, we lost over $5.5 million in revenue because we weren't barcode compliant on the roll-out date."

"Wait a second. Are you trying to tell me that you lost over $5.5 million dollars in revenue because you couldn't get a $50,000 PO approved??" He replied, "In the current circumstances [the company was in Chapter 7 bankruptcy], it's easier to explain away lost revenue than to get a purchase order approved."

Clearly this project manager didn't do a good enough job of documenting the cost of doing nothing when submitting the business case for that purchase request!

By finding ways to decrease costs, increase profits, and reduce risk, you can add to your organization's bottom line. Which, in turn, is a business case for getting a raise come review time, right?

So far we've covered workplace negotiation and building business cases, but how does improv comedy fit in?

# Improv Comedy

Have you ever been asked a question that you weren't expecting and struggled to find an answer? Or have you ever been in a meeting that wasn't going well, and wished you could steer the conversation in a different direction?

Improv comedy to the rescue!

Improvised comedy is a performance art where people create skits or scenes based on audience suggestions, much like the U.K. and U.S. television shows, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* I'd been watching a local improv group perform for years, and when they invited me to take their Introduction to Improv class, I jumped at the chance. While I expected to have fun (which I did), I didn't expect to learn lessons that would advance my techcomm career.

## Yes, and...

The first law of improv comedy is "Yes, *and*...", meaning you accept whatever your partner gives you and add to it. For example, if a partner mimes balancing on a tightrope saying, "Daddy, I'm scared!", you would accept that premise and add to it, such as pointing to the imaginary water and replying, "Be careful, Billy—those alligators look hungry!" By doing "Yes, and", you move the story forward, creating an experience that builds one line to the next. It's fun for you, your partner, and the audience. The opposite of "Yes, and" would be replying with a completely different story line, or worse—flat out contradicting your partner.

Keep this in mind the next time you are in a work meeting. Observe how you react to others' ideas, and how they react to yours. Get in the habit of "Yes, and"-ing positive suggestions and see if your group gets more done—and has more fun in the process. Similarly, if someone offers what you think is a *bad* idea, rather than saying, "That's dumb!", say "Yes, and we could ***also*** try [a terrific idea of your own]!"

## Commit!

The next lesson I learned is that no matter what you do, commit to it. If you step forward and offer a line timidly, it will fall flat and drag down the energy of the performance. Even if what you say or do isn't the funniest or smartest choice, by committing to the action, by *really owning* the performance and going for it with as much energy and enthusiasm as you can muster—the audience will appreciate you taking a risk, even cheer you on. So, the next time you are interviewing for a job, pitching an idea to management, or speaking at an event, be ***bold***. Seize the opportunity!

## Turn Off Your Censor

When I mention to friends that I do improv, many often state that they could never think fast enough to do improv. What's interesting is that the first thing they teach in improv is to *not* think, but just be in the moment and *listen*.

Your mind exists to keep you safe. Performing in front of people (or speaking up in a work meeting) is anything but safe, so your mind wants to sensor what you think, what you do, what you say. And while such censorship is absolutely vital to avoiding hot stoves and speeding cars, it can work against you at work, at networking events, at conferences. If you're thinking, "Is this right? Will I look stupid?, your attention is in your head, not on the person or people with whom you are speaking.

No matter where you are, just be there—in mind, body, *and* spirit. Turning off (or at least ignoring) your mental censor may seem difficult if not impossible at first, but it does get easier with practice.

## Really Listen

Have you ever had a conversation in which you could tell the other person was thinking about what they are going to say next rather than listening to what you were saying at the moment? If you are actively thinking of the next thing to say, then you are not actively listening. You need to *listen* to your partner/coworker/castmate to effectively "Yes, and..." in response. By actively listening and using "Yes, and", you can smoothly respond to questions you weren't expecting. Want to get more done, make more money, have a calmer life? Be less in your head, listen more.

## Be a Gracious Follower

Another life lesson learned from studying improv: be a gracious follower. At the beginning of my first improv class, the instructor laid down only two rules: "Have fun" and "Be supportive."

When the course began, some students were reluctant to go first and others struggled to find an idea to open with. Being a personality Type-A extrovert, I had no such problems—I always had an idea, and I always wanted to go first. What I had to work on was not confidence, but *patience*. I had to practice waiting and letting others take the lead.

This is especially important in work situations. How often are the enthusiastic extroverts talking at the expense of more reserved introverts? Quiet introverts have opinions and ideas that are just as valuable as their louder counterparts. However, introverts process information differently—they often need time to digest a question, synthesize their thoughts, and present their ideas later. So now I actively listen to others (in work, in class, in life), and let them lead as well.

## The Golden Triangle

You can have the greatest idea for generating revenue or saving your organization money, but it will never happen if the project isn't heard and funded. By honing your workplace negotiation skills, your ability to "Yes, *and*...", and your ability to craft iron-clad business cases, you'll be able to handle almost any workplace situation, obtain resources, and advance your career.

So pitch your business case, get the resources you need, and negotiate a raise and a promotion. The sky's the limit! ■

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# Recognition and Intention in a Remote Environment

By Siobhan Patterson | Gold Member

**Communication is key for preventing burnout. Learn to recognize the signs of changes in team member behaviors and how to be intentional in your responses.**

Through my career as a technical writer, I've found it invaluable to be intentional with communication style, time commitments, listening, and reading skills. This intention is often tested, particularly as irregular virtual chats replace casual cube chatter with more companies providing remote or hybrid work options. For these teams, the buffers of everyday run-ins have, to some extent, been eliminated, so sometimes workers only encounter what is sent in an email or chat message. Because of this, we need to be intentional in our interactions.

## Set Time, Create Space, and Follow Up

We have to set time that aligns with others' schedules and formally invite them for brief "coffee chats" or 1-on-1 catchups. It's not as simple as catching someone in the breakroom or as they leave a conference room as it was in the office environment. We also need to be cognizant of how we use that scheduled time. If we're training others to use software programs or adapt a new strategy program, we need to create space for those to ask questions and practice in real time. We also need to be intentional in offering virtual office hour blocks and follow-up sessions to help ensure that progress is moving in the right direction. We have to be intentional in our education plans and communication, acknowledging that one one-hour session won't sustain the growth of the team's knowledge and skills.

We also have to be intentional in how we communicate. In a virtual world, it is easy to internalize feedback as a negative experience, especially with the removal of those everyday, in-person buffers. Such feedback can even lead to friction and a lack of trust between team members when the only form of communication is a series of inquiries or a surplus of edits. In these moments, we need to pause and try to understand each other before reacting. Sometimes even scheduling a few minutes to talk in real time can help eliminate manufactured realities and potential burnout.

## Recognize the Change

Often, there is this common notion to "embrace the change" and that even though change is painful, it may be necessary. Rather than embracing, we need to recognize the change in our colleagues. If we notice this change in either quality or attitude, we need to take a step back and recognize that there is a human behind the screen who is processing these changes—whether it's a company merger or an organizational structure realignment. These types of changes could lead to layoffs or team redistributions, creating uncertainty and fear for those who are affected.

Some might ignore the issue and let the performance continue to suffer, but the key is to identify nonverbals and have an open conversation to pinpoint how to better support each other.

**In a virtual world, it is easy to internalize feedback as a negative experience, especially with the removal of those everyday, in-person buffers.**

I remember a scenario more than a decade ago as a leader for my undergrad's campus publication. I spent three years with one of my editors and was familiar with the work she produced and her attention to detail. During one semester, there was a dip in her productivity and her designs were not up to her normal standards. I decided to check in with her and assess how things were going. It turned out she was dealing with some personal issues and stressed with her course load. The easy option could have been to mark up her work and tell her to redo the project, however taking those few minutes to check in and ask how she was doing, made a world of difference. As a result, we were able to resolve her workload issues and create a space for her to communicate future issues.

When we start to treat people as individuals instead of workers, we can create a safe space for them to communicate and work together to find solutions. It can help build a culture to make them feel valued and more than a line item in the budget. In doing so, it can also reduce project timelines. Assignments can be temporarily delegated to others without fear of being

judged or losing their job. These delegations can then increase productivity and quality so that editors and project coordinators are not presented with incomplete or subpar drafts for review.

## The New Virtual Reality

Despite changes in our work landscape, the decades-old in-office example is still applicable to today's world. Even if we are not involved in daily communication like we would be in office, team cultures can adapt to the new virtual reality. It is important to pause and evaluate how the team is doing in these remote or hybrid environments.

For teams that require cameras for every meeting, this is the perfect opportunity to read the body language and facial expressions of team members when possible. We can assess team members' engagement, whether they're multitasking on a separate screen or if there's a change in their demeanor that indicates discomfort in the current conversation.

Even with cameras off, we can take note of changes in inflection and participation. When there are team members becoming more vocal who do not usually speak up, this is an indication that they are experiencing change. There are various reasons for this, whether they want to pursue new responsibilities in their role, partake in leadership training, don't agree with process changes, or are concerned with their future in the company.

These observations can be used to check in with individuals in a private setting, whether in a scheduled call or brief chat conversation. We can work with them to better understand their needs and encourage suggestions on how to improve their experience. This provides support to those who may not be confident communicating in a larger setting. By acknowledging patterns, we can increase our emotional intelligence and identify those who might need assistance.

For those private setting conversations, we can take advantage of this time to discuss individuals' priorities. We can gain their perspective of team dynamics and workloads and help them identify goals and strategies. Through conversations with multiple team members, we can identify common themes, such as a need for specific training or advice for recurring issues, that could help the team as a whole. We can then use this insight and develop plans to address concerns or coordinate educational resources. It's key that we use this feedback to evolve and act when possible. Actively listening can make a positive impact on teams, creating trust and supporting the flow of team communication. Change is difficult, but it's worse to leave the team behind or make them feel as though their opinion doesn't matter.

**Actively listening can make a positive impact on teams, creating trust and supporting the flow of team communication.**

## Be Intentional

Ignorance isn't bliss in a team environment. Ignoring or continuing to make excuses for known issues is the easy choice, but it's not the healthy one. Sometimes, it's easy for projects to fall toward the bottom of the priority list, because of expectations from other departments or leaders.

Cross-functional collaboration is an example of this. Each stakeholder has their own priorities and deadlines. When supporting a new product, writers work alongside product owners, marketing associates, user experience designers, and technical teams. Product owners need to run through a proof of concept, focus on development, and identify a beta client. Marketing has to choose the product name and involve the legal team before they start creating the necessary collateral. Technical teams must secure the environment and work with user experience designers to streamline the client journey. While these stakeholders are focused on their requirements, the user manual and associated bulletins are not likely at the top of their priority list. However, for writers, these projects are the focus and need to be included in conversation during product development in time for deployment.

As a result, writers must be intentional in their strategies and actively participate as part of the larger

cross-functional team. If there are go-to-market activities with sprint meetings, it is important that we engage in those meetings. If there are demo sessions or practice runs in preparation for client meetings, it is important we are part of those discussions. We have to do everything in our power to be part of the conversation or we'll get left behind and have to rush projects at the last minute. This lack of intention can also add unnecessary pressure and lower the quality of our projects. We need to take ownership of establishing those communication channels and conduct research to expand our understanding of the project. Initiating these relationships and showing interest in the process can help writers learn about the different personalities on the project team and how to best work alongside them.

For some projects, there are personalities committed to a collaborative environment. In many cases, they may appreciate your involvement and take the time to walk through the product features or user interface experience. They may also provide insight into how you can strategize documentation to match their expectations. If you can demonstrate a general understanding of processes and that you've completed some initial research, they might be more receptive to helping you learn the next level of technical information.

For other projects, there are those personalities that don't have bandwidth, whether in time or personnel, to collaborate often. Their time may be limited, and they may be unable to provide additional product training calls or answer questions about feature functionality. By recognizing this type of personality, you can assess the communication method that would be more appropriate. In some instances, you might need to identify other resources in the organization who can support your documentation when the key stakeholders are unavailable. These resources could be other teams assigned to the project, such as client trainers or instructional designers.

Whichever type of project team you run across, keep a running log of project notes and touch base on a regular basis to review any relevant developments or delays that could affect your process. It's on the writer to own the documentation process rather than to assume that key stakeholders will follow up once all their priorities are completed.

Ultimately, the writer is also responsible for communicating with their leaders and sharing any roadblocks hindering the process. In turn, the leader should monitor how the writer is handling the project—in terms of both quality and stress levels. When it's smooth sailing, leaders can trust writers to continue the process as planned. However, if there are constant changes or delays in the product development preventing the writer to move forward, the leader must evaluate the situation. The leader and writer can work together to determine the best use of resources and rework the strategy to establish realistic goals. If we're intentional in our communication, both with cross-functional teams and our leadership, we can help ensure our projects are given the time they deserve.

## Save Your Teams

Communication is key to preventing burnout. By recognizing changes in behavior, both verbal and nonverbal, and choosing to be intentional in how you respond to these changes, you can improve your team's culture. You own your experience as a writer, but you can also help others own their experiences by pausing and offering support, when needed, in the remote or hybrid environment. ■

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# Decoding Features and Benefits for Technical Writers

By Girish Hasabnis | Senior Member

**How to better author business-focused content and how emphasizing product benefits can help your readers use products to their fullest potential.**

When creating technical content, technical writers often face a dilemma of writing the features and benefits of the product. Beyond doubt, everyone understands that the features distinguish the product from its competitors. If a technical writer authors content for features, there is a chance of the content becoming feature-focused. Although feature-focused documentation played a vital role previously, the technical writers must author content these days after considering the functionality and features, and most importantly the benefits of the product. This article tries to explain the concept of features and benefits, the difference between them, and finally how technical writers can author the content for features.

## What Is a Feature?

Dictionary.com explains a feature as a prominent and conspicuous part or characteristic. A feature can also be explained with the help of the following definitions:

- A feature is the thing that your product contains or is. This is typically the functionality that your product offers and enables its users to do something.
- A feature answers the *what* and (sometimes) *how* questions for users.
- A feature addresses the common problems that the users face and provides competitive advantages to them.
- A feature also provides factual information to the user. In other words, a feature is what something *is*.
- Features are the characteristics or aspects of your product, which can be technical.
- ProductPlan.com defines a feature as a product's attributes that deliver some value to its end-users and differentiate a product in the given market. A feature of a software product can include any functionality, capability, and even its visual characteristics.

## What Are the Benefits?

A benefit is a result or outcome that the user experiences by using one or more features. A benefit also explains what a user can *do*, *perform*, or *accomplish* with the help of the feature helping users take action. A benefit generally has a positive impact on the user or removes the negative impact that the user has. A benefit can also explain what a feature means to its user.

## Why Are Benefits Important?

- The benefits help a user to answer the questions—what's in it for me and what will this feature do for me?
- The benefit explains to the user how the feature is going to have a positive and valuable impact on the work.
- Explaining benefits explicitly in the documentation helps the user understand the uses of the feature that are not so obvious.
- A benefit answers the *why* question for the user.

**A benefit is a result or outcome that the user experiences by using one or more features. A benefit also explains what a user can *do*, *perform*, or *accomplish* with the help of the feature helping users take action.**

## Guidelines for Identifying the Benefits of a Feature and Authoring Content

While authoring content for the identified feature, you can try to answer the question—what's in it for me—from your user's perspective. Answering this question or finding information about this question might lead you to understand the benefit that the user will get by using the identified feature, and then author the content. You might also understand the challenge or problem that the users faced previously and how the newly developed feature tries to overcome that challenge. You can try to understand the positive impact that the feature offers or the negative impact that the feature eliminates.

*Table 1: Few examples of features and benefits*

| Feature | Describing only features and their specifications | Describing benefits along with the features and specifications |
|---|---|---|
| **3D viewer** | The 3-dimensional viewer displays the CAD design of the gearbox assembly in 360 degrees. | Use the 3-dimensional viewer to view the CAD design of the gearbox assembly in various angles and ensure that the distances between the gears are within the tolerance limits. |
| **Render a document** | A document can be rendered in different file formats. For example, a Microsoft Word document can be rendered into a PDF document. | Render a document to different file formats so that the other users can access and read it.<br><br>Rendering a document to a different file format also helps you ensure that the shared users do not edit the source document.<br><br>For example, render a Microsoft Word document into a PDF document and then share the PDF document with other users. |
| **Track changes in Word** | Track changes help you mark the changes and suggestions that you make to the original document. | Turning on Track Changes gives you and your coworkers a way to make changes that are easy to spot. The changes are like suggestions that you can review, and then remove them or make them permanent.<br><br>*Source:* https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/track-changes-in-word-197ba630-0f5f-4a8e-9a77-3712475e806a#:~:text=Open%20the%20document%20that%20you,to%20turn%20on%20track%20changes. |

For identifying the benefits of a feature, you might need to perform some research, such as talking to various stakeholders to increase your subject or domain knowledge and to visualize how users would use the feature. You can also make an exhaustive list of the features and author benefits that each feature offers and the actions that a user can take. This exhaustive list of features and their benefits can also be a good starting point for you to author the content. Finally, there are many more ways than the ones that are listed here. You can see what works best for you.

## Places in a Document Where Benefits Can Be Better Explained

You can consider explaining the benefits at the places in a technical document including the following ones:

- Short paragraphs
- Introductions
- Tables
- Notes and footnotes
- Annotations including graphics, multimedia, images, and diagrams
- Any other place that you think explaining benefits is required.

## When Should You Not Explain Benefits?

Sometimes explaining specifications of a feature is just enough. You need not explain its benefits. The following list describes some of the situations when feature description is enough:

- The user is technical enough and is more interested to understand the features and their technical aspects and specifications.
- The benefits are obvious and very common.
- You are explaining the procedures.

## How Much Focus Should Be Spent on Explaining Benefits?

Considering the technicality of the subject and the user for whom you are authoring the information, the right balance must be made between authoring the technical information of a feature and describing its benefits. Marketing and sales documents tend to include more benefits-related information so that the reader can purchase the product. However, the technical documents should include the benefits-related information concisely and succinctly.

## Conclusion

While authoring the detailed information of a feature is important, a technical writer must also author the benefits of the feature so that the users can appreciate the feature and its use. ■

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# The Future's So Bright

**BY TIMOTHY ESPOSITO |** *STC President*

At my first job after college, the company threw a big welcome event for the new hires. We all got corporate logo sunglasses before the CEO appeared and gave us an inspirational speech ("the future is browsers embedded in operating systems!"). And, as a surprise, they produced a video of the event set to the song, *The Future's So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades*. Even for the 90s, that was … not entirely slick. However, the unrivaled optimism of the company was infectious, and we were all excited to move to our desks, use Internet Explorer 4 for the first/last time to download and navigate to Netscape Communicator 4.5, and get to work.

Today, STC is launching FireFox 113 and putting on that pair of sunglasses as it looks to the future. The society has a lot of history accumulated over the past 70 years. While maintaining that legacy is important, we need STC to be agile and to anticipate and exceed the needs of the members. Now we are at a crossroads: balancing the old and new.

To begin this season, at the Summit in Atlanta, the society has already launched on its path forward while keeping an eye on the past. After bidding a fond farewell to our longtime leader, Liz Pohland, we introduced Tim Shaw as the new executive director. Tim wasn't the only new topic at the conference: we had a great turnout of first-time attendees, there was a new format where the vendors were integrated into the social area, and our conference opening presentation and the awards ceremony were all held during luncheons. Popular presentation topics looked to the future with AI ChatGPT technology while also remembering the past from a long time ago in a session on building a taxonomy through Star Wars. Meanwhile, STC also had a multi-table display showcasing the society's past to celebrate its 70th anniversary. When I chatted with attendees and vendors, my small sample group seemed very pleased with the conference and were excited to attend a future STC Summit.

As everyone relaxes after the Summit, the STC Board of Directors is just getting warmed up. Just before the conference, the new board was inaugurated. We spent a good portion of our first board meeting going over what makes STC work, and what can make it work better. One of our next steps was to get the STC Committee Chairs in place. Chairing a committee is a terrific honor, and much like Spider-Man, comes with great power and great responsibility. Over the past several years, I've chaired several award committees and doing so has been one of the most rewarding STC activities; so few positions in our world exist just to thank and recognize individuals or communities. In addition to kickstarting the committees, the board is working closely with the STC staff. STC hasn't had a new executive director in a long time, and Tim Shaw brings years of experience to the table. As Tim transitions into the executive director role, the board will be working with Tim to merge our 70 years of experience with his new ideas, with the goal of producing an even stronger STC for you.

Where do you see STC taking you? Where do you want to go with STC? What do you want to bring to STC? What do you want to see change in STC, or what would you like to maintain? What obscure song do you want me to reference next time? Let me know by sending an email to board@stc.org. ■

**TIMOTHY ESPOSITO** (tmesposit.stc@gmail.com) is the 2023-24 president of STC. His ongoing column will keep you updated on STC's direction and be filled with outdated cultural references such as https://youtu.be/8qrriKcwvlY.

# The Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBOK) Project Twenty Years Later

**BY DEANNE LEVANDER** | *Fellow*

## What Is a Body of Knowledge?

A body of knowledge is an accepted component of a profession. For example, a medical body of knowledge includes a repository of industry knowledge, a guide to practice management, an assessment of competency, and a learning tool (for example, device training by industry representatives). The Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBOK) contains content that supports the technical communication discipline, which covers the broad range of material represented by the industries in which technical communicators practice their craft.

## A Brief History of the TCBOK

The original TCBOK began as a brainstorming effort at the 2008 Summit in Philadelphia. The next year, the first phase of the BOK was unveiled at the 2009 Summit in Atlanta. The effort to start the project (as it was known) was enormous. It is fitting that a new, improved TCBOK strikes at the 2023 Summit, also in Atlanta.

Many STC members have participated in the development of TCBOK content and the TCBOK iterations. Without this volunteer participation, there would be no TCBOK. STC leaders from industry and academia have steered the body of knowledge through three different platforms. The first platform was a wiki-based platform, which allowed anyone's content to be added under pre-set content areas. The second platform was a WordPress® platform that included a wiki plug-in. The current platform is a WordPress® website. Many STC volunteers have contributed content and participated as editors and platform managers. The WordPress® platforms allowed back-end access to edit and manipulate content based on volunteer-developed standards and style.

Among the earliest contributions were the TCBOK personas. At the time they were added to the TCBOK, the personas included age, marital status, and other characteristics that are not particularly relevant to the role they play as current TCBOK users. To maintain relevancy, personas should be updated (for example, to keep up with technology, terminology, or demographics). An article from the Nielsen-Norman Group (leaders in research-based user experience) outline how and why to update personas to maintain relevancy.

What, then, should the TCBOK contain? After a lot of discussion and much debate, the TCBOK committee and team agreed to pull in STC content from *Intercom*, *Technical Communication* journal, and other STC publications. In the past year, the TCBOK team began combing through *Intercom* articles that fit the main and subordinate topics. The team created a new site map and the TCBOK began its third iteration as a website.

## The TCBOK Today

The current TCBOK team works to connect existing content to new topics, subtopics, and headings within the existing content framework. During the past year, the team has met on a number of Saturday mornings to identify relevant content for each topic and put it where it belongs. During these working meetings, new topics have been discovered and existing topics and subtopics were moved or otherwise altered. An additional challenge for the TCBOK team is to determine how to adjust the style sheets following a recent theme change. Theme changes can wreak havoc on sites that have custom styles set up, and the TCBOK has undergone a number of platform and theme changes, which have stopped the TCBOK editors a number of times. However, regardless of the technological

challenges, the editorial team continues to link existing content and find new content.

The TCBOK has a been a long-term project of the Society for Technical Communication. It has been in-process for at least 20 years, having moved from a wiki-based platform to the current website platform. During those 20 years, many changes have occurred in both content and format. What you see online now is the most current version, although the format needs more tweaking.

Because the TCBOK is managed by volunteers, progress can be slow depending on volunteer workloads. For example, when I was a freelance technical writer, I had far more free time to devote to the TCBOK. As with any volunteer work, the rate at which changes can occur ebbs and flows, based on individual contributors and project needs.

As an example, one of the TCBOK editors recently developed a navigation aid, which will be added to the current TCBOK. In addition, another editor kicked off a site map that is governing where content should be placed. It informs the editors what and where content belongs. The exciting part about being on the TCBOK team is seeing the constant state of change that brings the site closer to a useful tool that will serve technical communicators in various stages of their professional life.

Previous editors contributed editing skills as well as a robust style and standards guide and the basis for contributing content. Anyone joining the TCBOK editor team will have access to the TCBOK styles and standards, which are based on STC's standards. We defer to the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *American Heritage Dictionary*.

Take a moment today to visit tcbok.org. Click through the main and subordinate tabs to get a feel for its organization. Remember, not all content has been linked, but the categories represented by the tabs may encourage you to submit an article.

## Content Heuristics

We use a set of heuristics to guide our content acceptance. Content must meet three out of the five points. These rules of thumb also guide our reviews, when we determine what content can be updated or what content should be removed.

- It is timely or contributes to STC's history.
- It is relevant to the discipline of technical communication.
- It provides value to practitioners (for example, advances their knowledge) and academics (for example, it can contribute to a syllabus for a course in technical communication).
- It is original and not redundant TCBOK content.
- It aligns with one or more of the nine core competencies of professional certification.

Most content can be weighed against this list with clear results. It either meets the criteria or it does not. This has been very helpful to the TCBOK editing team. Early contributions included student papers and practitioner pieces: each of these contributions may or may not be relevant now. The TCBOK team determines the relevance of all existing content as they move through each topic.

## Where the TCBOK Is Headed Next

The TCBOK committee creates goals each year, adding them to the TCBOK Committee charter. The goals for the TCBOK are remarkably consistent from year to year. This STC tool contains a vast library of content that needs annual review against the heuristics. We are currently identifying articles in *Intercom* that support the tabs. Each TCBOK editor concentrates on one tab, adding relevant articles from *Intercom* in addition to editing content that currently exists. Eventually, relevant content from the *Technical Communication* journal will be incorporated into the TCBOK. Adding content that supports the STC certification program is another TCBOK committee goal. ■

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**DEANNE LEVANDER** is an STC Fellow, past Society and chapter leader, longtime TCBOK and STC volunteer. She works for an international biomedical manufacturing company and lives in St. Paul, MN.

# Advancing Your Tech Comm Career

**BY KEVIN MEGLIC** | *Member*

In the last *Advancing Your Tech Comm Career* column, we covered creative ways to network and broaden your skills and knowledge base. Examples included using social media to connect with other professionals in the industry, volunteering, using public speaking opportunities, and building marketable skills while broadening your knowledge base.

In this edition, we touch on the importance of using life experiences you already have, finding a mentor, and going that extra mile for your organization.

## All Your Experience Is Relevant

I was looking back the other day on the various careers I have had over the last 25 years, and how each one of them gave me important skills that make me successful as a recruiter and a director of operations for an annual conference.

In the U.S. Navy, I learned the importance of being a team player, punctuality, organization, and leadership. As an electrician, I learned customer service, planning, outside-the-box thinking, and diplomacy. (If you've ever had to work a project with different teams, each of which thinks they are the most important, you know what I mean.)

I wanted a job I could do indoors, so I went back to school. When it came time to use my new degree, I didn't think I had any experience relevant to staffing within the tech comm industry. It was pointed out to me that everything I had learned in my previous roles could be applied to this one. So don't think that what you are doing currently is time wasted. It is all skill building!

## Finding a Mentor

One thing I did that helped tremendously in breaking into a new industry was finding a mentor. My boss and mentor Jack Molisani always says, "An expert is someone who has made all mistakes possible in a given field—assuming you don't keep repeating them." How do you avoid making these same mistakes? Find someone who has already made them and learn from them!

A mentor is also a great sounding board. By having someone who has been in your shoes to bounce ideas off of, you can stand out at planning meetings and appear more familiar

with the subject matter or process than you might otherwise.

Technical communication has been around for centuries. And while it keeps growing and evolving with each new advancement, the core skills stay the same. So get out there and find your mentor!

## Go the Extra Mile

It has become commonplace to "just do your job." We go to work every day, do the task assigned, and go home. That's all fine and well for the individual who just wants to keep the status quo, fly under the radar, and collect a paycheck. But not you (if you are reading this article)—you don't fit that bill.

I remember in the Navy, the most hated job on board ship, was cleaning the heads (bathrooms) in the berthing (sleeping) area.

When I arrived at my first ship, I was assigned to clean the berthing. When it came time to clean, I immediately volunteered to clean the heads (advice given to me by a senior sailor). I did so for the first four months I was onboard. When my supervisor moved on to another assignment, who do you think he chose to replace him. That's right, me!

So, ask your supervisor if there are any projects currently or on the horizon that you could take on. Volunteer for assignments that no one else wants to do. When it comes time for management to choose that next leader, your contributions won't go unnoticed.

## Diversify Your Client Base

Many of us find an industry (automotive, medical devices, telecom) and get comfortable within it—similar subject matter, consistent work, and so on. What happens when that technology is no longer relevant or that industry in particular is in a slump? By diversifying your client base and taking on a project outside of your established industry, you become more well-rounded, less complacent, and closer to that expert as we defined it earlier.

## In Closing

Many skills you already possess can help you advance your career. Identify and tap into them! Use the knowledge of those who came before you to help identify avoidable mistakes. Be that person who not only wants to succeed, but who is also an asset to their company. All of these things can help you on your way up to achieve that next career goal. Go for it! ■

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# Soft Skills—The Vital Elements for Technical Communicators

**BY FRANCIS BAO |** *Associate Fellow*

Many technical communication professionals think that technical skills are the only skills they need to look for jobs or to accomplish projects in their workplaces. However, they may have ignored some other very important soft skills that can affect their ability to perform a job better. Soft skills are interpersonal skills used to describe your approach to life, work, and relationships with other people. Unlike technical skills, these are not professional job-specific skills, such as writing, editing, and graphic design. Soft skills mostly are not taught in school, but they are often acquired through real-world practice. These skills include communication, listening, time management, problem solving, teamwork, interpersonal ability, creative thinking, and motivation. Soft skills will help you stay ahead of the competition and perform your work significantly better, as well as improve relationships with your co-workers and clients in the technical communication profession.

Communication is a written and verbal skill that enables you to clearly express the message while also considering the tone and delivery. This skill is very important for technical communication professionals who need to communicate with employers, colleagues, and clients, especially in a project environment. Being well-versed in communicating in a simple and easy-to-understand manner allows technical communicators to effectively address client needs and avoid misunderstanding.

Listening is a crucial factor that will help technical communicators accomplish projects successfully. In a project situation, a technical communicator needs to interview a client to gather technical information for producing documents, such as user guide, software manual, or promotional brochure. During the interview, the technical writer needs to listen carefully to catch all vital information. In addition, asking questions and soliciting feedback from the client will help clarify information for the project. A technical communicator with good listening skill will always accomplish jobs more effectively.

Time management is the ability to use your time effectively and productively. In the field of technical communication, a project manager should plan and prioritize tasks or activities accordingly. Time management will help technical communicators avoid feeling overwhelmed and get projects completed despite the pressure and tight deadlines. At the same time, the skill will also help them eliminate distractions which can affect the progress of projects and speed up the workflow.

Problem solving is a soft skill that will enable technical communicators to identify a problem and resolve it with logical, timely, and relevant solutions. This skill allows a technical communicator to handle different challenges or difficult situations in a workplace as well as in a project environment. It is very important to target an issue and then plan and select the best strategies to resolve it. Problem solving also helps a project manager test and evaluate whether these strategies are working or not.

Teamwork and collaboration are vital components of a team's success in the technical communication profession. Employers want their employees to

be team players who can work with other people well. An excellent team player is able to demonstrate leadership, collaboration, and effective communication. These skills are especially significant for working in a project environment. The success of the projects depends on how efficient its team members communicate and handle tasks together. Teamwork in a technical communication workplace will build trust among co-workers so that they can share knowledge and achieve their goals.

Interpersonal ability is essential for professional success. People in the technical communication field with strong interpersonal ability can share ideas, points of view, expertise, and information effectively. Interpersonal ability helps build relationships with others. Also these professionals should be able to demonstrate interpersonal skill while engaging in any verbal or non-verbal communication. Strong interpersonal ability is considered a valuable asset in a workplace or in a project environment. The benefits of this skill include the ability to work with others such as employers, colleagues, and clients, as well as in navigating complexity, changes, and everyday tasks. It is one of the most in-demand soft skills that many corporations look for during the hiring process. If you are a technical writer applying for a position, consider what interpersonal ability means in your job role; try to make every effort to acquire the skill and gain a competitive advantage.

Creative thinking is the ability to come up with unique and original solutions. This is a valuable soft skill in the technical communication profession. Creative thinking is also about developing innovative solutions to problems, which improves practices and processes. It is a very important skill for a project manager who can brainstorm not only a large number of ideas but also the variety and aspects of them. Once the manager brainstormed the ideas, the members of the project team will experiment with them by looking at these ideas from multiple perspectives and examine how their solutions fit into the scope of what they are working on. Creative thinking in the technical communication profession requires a project team to hold an interactive brainstorm to gather initial thoughts on a project, evaluate a current process, offer suggestions on how to improve it, and develop innovative ways to reach out to prospective clients.

Motivation is another soft skill that will help technical communicators handle difficult situations in a stressful environment. Motivation can be defined as actions or strategies that elicit a desired behavior or response from a stakeholder. When a team is working on a project, they may meet various obstacles. The project manager should address these problems and provide rewards for desired outcomes. Motivational skill can impact the results significantly in a workplace. Positive motivation will give team members confidence and courage to reach their objectives. It also will lead to growth for both employees and the company.

Training in soft skills can support success in the technical communication profession. Soft skills may not be tangible as technical skills such as writing, editing, and translating, however, developing soft skills training is just as important. Since companies recognize the significance of soft skills in the workplace having the right blend of technical and soft skills is essential for building effective, collaborative, and dynamic project teams. Toward the goal, employers should establish training programs that include coaching, mentoring, workshops, and eLearning programs that support soft skills in the workplace. These programs can improve and impact the performance of employees, and attract more clients and potentially generate more revenue for companies.

Soft skills also help establish good relationships with your co-workers and help you make positive contributions to teams and organizations. ■

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